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ABSTRACT

A classroom presents the perfect opportunity for teachers and teacher educators to perpetuate the all-encompassing idea of democracy. A democratic classroom requires of all its participants that they welcome joint decision-making, be committed to a dynamic common good, have the necessary skills, be open to other points of view, be committed to democratic ideals, and be ready to take risks. In theory and practice, democratic classroom communities operate on a continuum with different degrees of democracy. Certain instructional strategies support authentic experiences in the teacher education classroom: (1) partnership with public schools, such as professional development schools; (2) use of case studies; (3) democratic practices in student opportunities for self-assessment and choice; (4) cooperative learning and conflict resolution; and (5) service-related field experiences. As students progress through the teacher education program, they would continue to work in a variety of cooperative learning situations and to have several role models to observe. Preservice teachers are urged "to care, to give, and to serve," thereby actively participating in democracy and its ideals. (JLS)

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CLASSROOMS AS DEMOCRATIC COMMUNITIES

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"Classrooms as Democratic Communities"

Every day teacher educators are constantly faced with the dilemma of how they can nurture a "democratic disposition" in their students in order to perpetuate societal values. Students do not need to learn ABOUT democracy, they need to LIVE democracy. According to Sergiovanni, "What better way is there to teach these values than actually living them? What better way for students to understand what is needed for democracy to work than for schools and classrooms to become democratic communities?" (1994, p. 138). Teacher educators must examine what they can do to empower their students to make authentic decisions that value and model democratic principles in public school classrooms. These positive changes that lead to a democratic culture begin, however, with authentic experiences that teacher educators have the opportunity to provide.

This metamorphosis begins with the teacher educator's self-examination of the limited way s/he may think about democratic principles and practices. It is the responsibility of teacher educators to step forward as leaders who envision the classroom as a democratic community in which they address not just what is but what should be.

The perspective of North American teacher education has waxed and waned between encouraging teachers to believe in learner-centered democratic classrooms versus a more teacher-centered approach through behavioristic teaching and learning. Currently, under the philosophy of constructivism, in classrooms at all levels, future teachers receive instruction in how to engage students in democratic learning in "risk-encouraging classrooms." But more importantly teacher educators have opportunities to see and practice effective teaching and learning strategies that promote democratic ideals. As prospective teachers associate theory with practice, democracy begins to unfold in these authentic, democratic classroom settings.

The purpose of this presentation is to engage participants in dialogue that encourages self-examination and self-reflection about their authentic use of democracy and democratic principles in the teacher education classroom. Specifically, participants will:

1. Review a rationale for employing democratic practices in the teacher education classroom.
2. List and discuss the characteristics of a democratic classroom climate and culture.
3. Generate personal experiences to enhance the existing definition of "democratic climate and culture."
4. Engage in discussion regarding meaningful classroom practices teacher educators can use to model democratic principles and engage students in democratic practices.
5. Utilize a self-check to reflect upon their philosophies and methodologies regarding democratic practices and set goals to operationalize change.

Contextual Examination of Democracy

Webster's definition of democracy examines the idea of power. When democracy is valued, power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation. This power, however, is seen only in the context of commitment to the "common good" vs. "individual good." (Wood, 1992, p. 85). Generally speaking, democracy implies systematic, collaborative decision-making in which all parties involved are represented in decisions that affect them. These attributes are parallel to building a democratic classroom culture and climate. The complex nature of the word "culture" also promotes the concept of shared power in that culture is created and not imposed. (Sergiovanni, 1994).

A classroom presents the perfect opportunity for teachers and teacher educators to perpetuate the all-encompassing idea of democracy in its full context. A democratic classroom requires of its participants that they: (1) welcome opportunities to make decisions within the framework of a democratic community, and that those decisions are centered on the common good; (2) are committed to the fact that common good is dynamic and not static; (3) possess the communication and social skills in order to carry out meaningful, successful dialogue; (4) are receptive to various points of view; (5) are committed to democratic ideals including "equity, justice, and community;" and (6) are ready and willing to take risks in order to find solutions that promote excellence for all. (Wood, 1992, p. 81).

Setting the Stage

Personal implementation of such democratic practices varies according to organizational and individual needs. Teachers and learners alike may translate the aforementioned theories into practice in a variety of ways. Practically speaking, in a classroom in which democracy is strongly valued, the first order of business is meeting the basic needs of all parties involved, including physiological, safety, belongingness, self-esteem, and power needs. Next, a system of rules, rewards and consequences provides the scaffolding for behavior. Teachers and learners alike are caring, empathetic and open-minded beings and feel responsibility for each other. Further, the value of the individual operates within a group context.

In theory and practice, democratic classroom communities operate on a continuum with degrees of democracy present. The following instructional strategies are recommended to assist teacher educators in preparing prospective teachers in becoming an "active, informed citizenry committed to . . . democratic processes" via authentic experiences in the higher education classroom. (Willis, 1996, p. 4).

Partnerships with Public Schools

Authentic democratic teaching and learning at its best is represented when pre-service teachers learn how communities combine efforts to ensure safe and successful learning environments for future generations of adult decision makers.

Through supporting mentors and actual engagement in democratic practices, novice teachers reflect on successful teaching techniques and learning strategies which are based on actively engaged learners in learner-centered classrooms.

Through authentic experiences in professional development schools in low income areas, these teacher-learners see first hand how community members rely on schools to provide basic human needs, as well as necessary experiences for construction of young learners' knowledge, and often moral and ethical value systems. Service to the community becomes recognized as a real part of what school is. Effective and appropriate interactions with parents and care givers in home settings, enticing guardians to school campuses, and ensuring safety in school and between home and school become understood requirements of teaching in schools which have a mission of democratic practices for teachers and learners. Successful professional development schools with collegial partnerships between universities and schools provide the arena for such child and adult learning to take place. Interns begin to see and live the democratic ideal of service and their responsibility in its perpetuation.

Case Studies

As teacher educators facilitate learning through peer support group collaboration, pre-service teachers learn how societies and economic systems evolve successfully as they support others and derive consensus through discourse and group management strategies. In one particular teacher education classroom, students are directed to design and develop a case study on a student of their choice. While the focus of the course is on literacy strategies and successes, interns learn how to work in teams to ensure learning as concepts are integrated across content and discipline areas. Pre-service students in democratic classrooms are required to locate and contract with young learners, a task which informs them about interacting with community members to accomplish a task. As interns work together in pairs or small groups to derive appropriate strategies and activities, they learn skills for effective communication, ways to use quality verbal and non-verbal interchange, and how to take risks in making decisions. They learn how to manage difficulties in working out schedules, knowing they are individually and collectively responsible for the success of the project. As they move forward through the process, with minimal instructor guidance, they continually reflect on what works and what must be changed, how their interactions and behaviors are affecting their course grade and their conceptualizations, how to plan as inservice teachers must, and how to decide how much they are willing to give for the success of their interactive project. As they search for answers and engage in shared responsibilities, they learn to compromise and come to consensus. Such knowledge and skills are necessary components for success in democratic classrooms, thus societies.

Democratic Practices in Student Opportunities for Self-Assessment and Choice

Pre-service teachers in another program build experience in democratic practices through the opportunity to self examine, assess, and choose from works

completed that they wish to share with future instructors and with potential employers. Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, among others, has recently introduced a portfolio element into its teacher education program. This process incorporates the learning processes of collection, choice, collaboration, conferencing, and reflection as they relate to practice which supports a democratic view of education. While not yet a requirement, elementary and early childhood certification majors are encouraged early in their programs to begin to accumulate pieces of work that exemplify the breadth and depth of their teaching experiences.

Upon completing assignments in various courses, students are asked to evaluate their work using criteria they have helped establish, and to choose those pieces that best meet developed standards. In the process of choosing, students must articulate why they have chosen the particular piece and how it exemplifies their expertise and quality of teaching in that particular area. Instructors support students in their work by collaborating on the establishment of standards and creating specific occasions for students to choose works and prepare statements supporting their choices. As a specific example, students in their first curriculum course in the early childhood program choose from among their multiple lesson plans they have written over the length of the semester the one they believe is their "best," and prepare a letter explaining their choice. Later they present the chosen plan to the instructor of the next curriculum course in the program's sequence. In the process of so doing, students often confer with one another (and sometimes with the instructor) over the established standards and which of their pieces seems to fit these criteria best. Such conferencing is encouraged and supported by the instructors as a way of helping students prepare for acting as democratic members of and active citizens in the teaching profession. Students are also encouraged to reflect over other pieces created during the initial curriculum course (i.e., an integrated unit and an in depth assessment of a preschool child) and to choose and comment on those they feel particularly exhibit their developing abilities.

Such "reflecting" is central to the collecting, choosing, collaborating and conferencing cycle. At each stage students must use what they already know and combine it with what has been newly learned to make decisions as to what constitutes best practices and exemplars. Students must not only learn the material of the various courses, but also they must "know that they know" the material and the role it plays in their development as teaching professionals.

In later courses students work to develop other pieces that they often use to show their professional abilities and interests. A prime example is the personal philosophy statement written as part of a capstone course in the history and philosophy of early childhood education. An initial statement, written at the beginning of the course, is revised and rewritten as students are exposed to and process new ideas and influences on the profession. By examining their earlier drafts and revisions students can see how their personal philosophies are evolving and provide these as further proof of their growth.

For many of the students in these programs, democratic practices of self examination and assessment involving high levels of student choice, reflection, and decision making, culminate in the creation of a document known as the "portfolio." Portfolios are intended as organized collections of various works, accrued over the course of the student's time in the program, with the purpose of providing an holistic view of the student as teacher. The document can then be shared with potential or new employers and peers to help the student make the transition from student to professional in order to highlight the strengths and specific abilities they bring to their new profession. The goal is to have each portfolio reflect the individual who has created it to the greatest degree possible. This intent is accomplished through supporting students in their choices, but not "imposing" definitive elements or standardized items. It is hoped that through the processes used throughout the program and in the various course work, students will feel confident and competent in choosing and explaining items that best display their abilities and qualities as a teacher. Their abilities to so choose and present themselves and the freedom to represent themselves as individuals are further efforts by the program to instill democratic principles and give students the opportunity to develop as democratic practitioners.

Cooperative Learning and Conflict Resolution

Much of what has been accomplished in this world has been done by groups working toward a common goal. This democratic concept has been developed in classrooms under the designation of cooperative learning. Students have often spent much of their school career working alone on individual tasks and must be taught how to work together in cooperative groups. Social skills must be modeled and taught by the teacher if cooperative learning is to be effective in any classroom. (Johnson, Johnson, Holubec, & Roy, 1984). It is essential that students learn how to work together, communicate effectively, and settle conflicts in a positive manner. Group assignments should be kept simple and easy while social skills are being learned. (Ellis & Whalen, 1992). As positive interdependence is achieved group tasks are structured so that students must work together in order to succeed.

Teacher educators model the role of a democratic classroom instructor when pre-service and inservice teachers practice being part of cooperative teams in university classrooms. One such assignment in the introduction to an education seminar entitled, "Tomorrow's Teachers Talk Today," is the activity in which students discuss why successful college students should choose teaching, what they think will be the joys and frustrations of teaching in today's society, and what characteristics an effective teacher should possess. After experiencing initial cooperative learning activities, pre-service teachers are divided into cooperative groups. As students work together on this task and others, they must produce a finished product to be turned in for a group and an individual grade. The teacher educator encourages students "to begin to disagree" and to work through the conflict resolution process. As students become more vocal, other controversial topics are introduced such as whether prayer or values should be taught in public schools.

Although the professor often retains the power position, s/he must also learn to be a facilitator. As students take more responsibility for their learning, the teacher spends more time monitoring groups' activities. The teacher must detect when it is necessary to intervene in the group activity in order to help resolve problems and to keep students on task. Often times, the groups should be allowed to work out their own problems and receive the resulting rewards and consequences. Occasionally the teacher may encourage conflicts and then help the students negotiate a resolution. Or role play activities can be used to teach students how to resolve conflicts. When students cannot resolve their own conflicts then a third party, usually another student, helps the two parties reach a workable solution. Learning how to resolve conflict empowers students to become self-regulated, improves interpersonal relationships, and fosters a democratic community.

As students progress through the teacher education program at this university they continue to work in a variety of cooperative learning situations and have several role models to observe. They also have opportunities to implement cooperative learning activities during supervised field experiences. Inservice teachers are encouraged to teach cooperative learning strategies to their students in order to help build democratic communities.

Service Related Field Experiences

One of the basic tenets of a democratic community is the importance of valuing other people and working toward the betterment of the common good. People of all ages must be active citizens in their community in order to contribute to this common good. As teacher educators work with students they should encourage students to pursue service related activities. Pre-service teachers "want to care, want to give, and want to serve." (Sergiovanni, 1994, p. 137).

One approach requires pre-service teachers to tutor in a group home as part of an early field experience. Students work in pairs during set hours at a home for young women and are responsible for four hours of tutoring or for teaching a two-hour enrichment lesson. The professor requires tutors to use course-driven instructional strategies including anticipatory set and advance organizers. Students are encouraged to see and teach these tutees using all three domains of learning and to serve as effective role models. Tutors are encouraged to spend time talking with their tutees, to learn their names, and their strengths and weaknesses. Tutors are encouraged to talk about how getting an education can help build futures and why they are personally pursuing their college degree. These pre-service teachers are urged "to care, to give, and to serve," thereby actively participating in democracy and its ideals.

Summary

Several strategies which promote democratic ideals have been presented in which various programs encourage students to self-reflect, engage in collaboration, provide service to communities and schools, and participate in creating their own sense of professionalism. Teacher educators are in a critical position to perpetuate the democratic ideals upon which our nation was founded. Although numerous strategies exist, the best way to create democracy is to experience democracy. It is our hope that the information presented will assist teachers and teacher educators in bridging the gap from democratic theory into practice.

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